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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on previous research by exploring how the combination of white in-migration and recent school reform has affected the relationship between the formation, adoption, and implementation of educational policy in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district (North Carolina) and the district's African American citizens. The unexpected defeat of a school bond package in 1995 called attention to the need to understand the political and social climates affecting public attitudes toward education. A look at the school district's history and at the voting patterns in school bond referenda in the last 10 years shows that at the same time as there is evidence of a drift toward resegregation in the school district, concern with that topic has moved out of the public debate. In addition, since the initiation of the district's magnet plan and school reform agenda, there has been a sharp decline in the percentage of blacks who vote in favor of school bonds. The city's "growth machine" and, to some extent, the energy of civic leaders have become focused on other issues. There is reason to fear that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district may become resegregated, and that change may go largely unmarked in public discourse. (Contains 2 tables, 3 figures, and 45 references.) (SLD)

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BLACK POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION?

REGIME CHANGE AND SCHOOL REFORM IN CHARLOTTE, NC

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In the study of the contemporary politics of urban education, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district (CMS) merits attention. Located in a rapidly growing city and county, CMS is the district which gave rise to the 1971 Supreme Court decision (*Swann* v.*Charlotte-Mecklenburg*) allowing intradistrict busing for school desegregation. Furthermore, the district is currently led by one of the nation's most prominent superintendents, is implementing an ambitious program of school reform, and has the officially stated and oft-repeated aspiration of becoming the "premier urban, integrated public school system in the nation" (Murphy 1994). Yet the district differs significantly from many of the country's other urban districts in several important ways. First, as the name implies, the district has been a consolidated one since 1959. As a result of this consolidation, the district encompasses both the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, some of whose areas remain undeveloped and others of which are suburban by virtually any definition of that term. Second, the racial composition of the district's student body--54 percent white, 40 percent black, and 6 percent other ethnic groups--differs from a large number of other urban districts. Third, the district has not been significantly affected by white flight. In fact, as earlier research has shown, recent educational policy has been affected much less by white flight than by the relocation *to* Charlotte-Mecklenburg of middle class whites drawn by the area's expanding economy (Mickelson, Ray, and Smith 1994; Smith 1994).

This paper elaborates upon that earlier research by exploring in a preliminary manner how the combination of white in-migration and recent school reform has affected the relationship between the formation, adoption and implementation of educational policy in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and the district's African American citizens. There are several reasons for anticipating a significant degree of black marginalization. The first is simply the national political climate of the past few years. The second and more important reason is Charlotte-Mecklenburg's recent political history. As earlier research (Mickelson and Ray 1994; Mickelson, Ray and Smith 1994; Smith 1994) has shown, the educational and political agendas of Charlotte's business elites no longer coincide as much with those of local black leaders as they did in the early 1970s. Whereas twenty years ago, Charlotte's business elites played a pivotal political role in the adoption and implementation of the district's landmark busing plan, in more recent times they have played an equally pivotal role in its replacement by a magnet school program. Associated with such changes in educational policy have been broader changes in the local urban regime as downtown business elites have been forced to pay more attention to the interests and demands of newer, geographically outlying, politically more Republican organizational and individual entrants in Charlotte's political arena (Smith 1994).

While all of those considerations might lead one to hypothesize considerable black political marginalization in the educational arena, even a casual familiarity with contemporary Charlotte might lead one to think more readily of incorporation than marginalization, or at least hedge bets on any hypothesized marginalization. More so than at any time in CMS's history, African Americans nowadays walk in the corridors of educational power. For over 15 years, African

Americans have typically held two of the nine seats on the school board, and a black minister chaired the board when it hired the current superintendent and began its ambitious program of school reform in 1991-92. Furthermore, an African American who is a leading executive with the area's third largest bank heads the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Educational Foundation, a non-profit business-inspired organization that plays a major role in local educational affairs (Smith 1994). Another black business executive--the head of a Charlotte-based division of a large multinational corporation--played a key role in negotiating the 1995 bond package which I will discuss at length below.

Further leading one to hedge any bets is the fact that, as I will also discuss at length below, many of the African Americans especially prominent in educational matters disagree among themselves on key issues. That diversity argues against the validity of blanket claims about marginalization simply because what may be marginalization for one set of demands and interests might constitute just the opposite for a different set.[1]

Such hedges notwithstanding, blacks, I shall argue in this paper, are being marginalized in a manner that reflects the etymology of the word. A paramount educational concern of blacks for at least a generation--school desegregation--has been progressively pushed from the center to the margins of local public discourse, and perhaps even off the page. That sort of marginalization is especially noteworthy in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Not only did the district give rise to *Swann,* but the litigation was accompanied by intense local political battles whose result was a busing plan generally considered among the nation's most successful (Gaillard 1988, Orfield and Monfort 1988). This busing plan contributed heavily to both the city's growth and reputation for progressive race relations, and was a source of genuine and considerable pride to some of the most preeminent and visible members of the city's growth machine (Smith 1994). The 1972 school board election began a 15 year span in which no candidate running on an anti-busing platform won office, another indication of the extent to which school desegregation was an integral part of the community's political life.

However, this kind of black political marginalization is only part of the story. At the same time school desegregation has been moving from the center to the periphery of public discourse about the schools, the very educational policies that have produced this marginalization may, I will further argue, have also jeopardized key parts of CMS's ambitious school reform agenda by decreasing black support, traditionally higher than that of whites, for school bond referenda. This paper's analysis of bond referenda over the past ten years will produce strong evidence of a decline in black support for school bonds that is greater than that for other bond issues as well as greater than the decline in white support for school bonds.

The development of these arguments about changes in discourse and voting behavior will lead me to conclude the paper on a speculative note: the many differences among school districts and metropolitan areas notwithstanding, Charlotte may presently be undergoing a *de facto* version

of the arrangements in other districts through which increased resources are given to black schools in exchange for the acceptance of ongoing or increased racial segregation. The terms of such a bargain, I will suggest, may very well be affected by the ability of black voters to influence electoral outcomes, especially those on school bond referenda. Furthermore, I will also suggest, that kind of bargain in educational policy reflects the current fluidity of the local urban regime in a manner which parallels the way the much-heralded busing plan reflected the more stable and cohesive regime which existed prior to 1987.

All these considerations indicate that the political relationship between school reform and the needs/interests/demands of African Americans in Charlotte-Mecklenburg defies a simple summary, and this paper will make no attempt to provide one, especially because my analysis draws heavily on events of the past twelve months, and the next twelve could conceivably be different.[2] Consequently, my aim in this paper is to deal in an exploratory manner with only two aspects of a very complicated situation: public discourse about desegregation and support for school bonds by African Americans. Discussion of both topics must first be rooted in CMS's rich history.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Current CMS educational politics and policies have their roots in the district's desegregation history. While the courage and perseverance of African-Americans were the *sine qua non* of whatever credit Charlotte would eventually claim for its busing plan and progressive race relations, earlier research has shown that local business leaders played a key role in implementing desegregation once the Supreme Court affirmed district court judge James B.McMillan's initial order in *Swann* (Mickelson, Ray, Smith 1994; Smith 1994). Some of the most prominent of these business executives sent their children to the public schools, and even more of them touted and took pride in the city's pioneering school desegregation efforts. Furthermore, business support for school desegregation was intimately linked to the nature of Charlotte's urban regime from at least the late-1960s until approximately 1987 (Smith 1994). A key aspect of this regime was an electoral coalition between downtown business interests and the leadership of the black community that enabled the Democratic candidate to win all but one of the mayoral elections during this period. The election of Harvey Gantt, Charlotte's first African American mayor, in 1983 and 1985 exemplified the electoral clout of this coalition as well as the regime itself (Smith 1994).

While busing was generally seen as a redistributive issue, school desegregation had important developmental aspects insofar as the peaceful race relations which eventually developed in the aftermath of *Swann* facilitated Charlotte's dramatic economic growth. This growth was recognized in a November, 1991 *Fortune* article which touted Charlotte as the city with the best pro-business attitude in the United States, and noted:

> What this upstart North Carolina city lacks in polish, it makes up for in one all important intangible: pro-business attitude....Like Atlanta and Dallas, Charlotte suffers from high crime and public education woes. But thanks largely to the efforts of NCNB's acquisitive CEO, Hugh McColl, the city is gaining a reputation as a financial center that is eclipsing Atlanta's. Low manufacturing wages--a reflection of the the area's furniture - and textile-making past are attractive to industry ....Charlotte has a terrific back-office reputation, which helps attract such newcomers as Hearst Magazines' accounting operation (Huey 1991, p. 70).

While Hearst's offices are located downtown, many other relocated businesses are located on Charlotte-Mecklenburg's periphery. Perhaps more important than the physical site of these relocated businesses was the fact that the transferred employees as well as many other newcomers had not lived through the tumultuous days of desegregation and took little pride in the city's desegregation history. In addition, many of these newcomers, especially mid-level managers, had come from suburban school districts in other parts of the country. Their children attended all white school systems and, once in Charlotte, these executives had little use for a desegregation plan that often involved busing their children, especially in grades 4-6, into heavily black, inner city neighborhoods (Mickelson and Ray 1994; Mickelson, Ray, and Smith 1994; Smith 1994). By the late 1980s, grievances about busing as well as the quality of schools had become a staple of discourse in the chamber of commerce, the *Charlotte Observer*, and the biannual election campaigns for the school board.

In addition, the city's growth had important consequences for the regime in the electoral arena. A combination of this in-migration, the city's ambitious annexation plan which gave many newcomers a vote in city elections, and poor campaign tactics led to Harvey Gantt's upset defeat by Republican Sue Myrick in the 1987 mayoral election. Since Gantt's unexpected defeat in 1987, no Democrat has been elected mayor, strong evidence that the coalition between downtown and the leadership of the black community presently lacks the electoral clout it once had. Charlotte's urban regime is clearly in flux (Smith 1994). As one of its most influential and perceptive white business executives remarked:

> Charlotte is going through some sort of political transition it hasn't gotten itself out of yet, and I don't know where it is going. I really worry about the inability of some sort of ruling coalition to form, and I think the next mayor race [which takes place in November 1995] may be a good example of the inability of the community to bring forward a leader who can represent the whole community (Martin 1994).

One aspect of these many changes has been the extent to which downtown business interests have been paying attention to the demands and interests of the newer, generally more Republican, generally more suburban entrants in the local political arena. As a result, neither the

electoral nor educational interests of downtown business interests and black leaders have coincided anywhere near as neatly and fully in the early 1990s as they did from the early 1970s through the mid-1980s. The most dramatic evidence in the educational arena of this change was a March, 1992 school board decision to dismantle the city's busing plan in favor of a system of magnet schools. Earlier research has called attention to the decisive role that downtown businesses including the city's only daily newspaper, the *Charlotte Observer,* played in electing the school board which voted 9-0 in favor of this magnet plan as well as in marshaling support for the Superintendent, John Murphy, who proposed it (Smith 1994). Earlier work has also emphasized that the vast majority of the board's members who voted to end the busing plan had successfully campaigned *against* candidates whose platform--neighborhood schools and an end to busing--would have largely served to resegregate the schools. For these school board members, "the magnet plan was an attempt to have the cake and eat it as well: to placate those opposed to "forced" busing, hitch CMS's wagon to the rising star of school choice, and maintain a desegregated school system along with the presumably tranquil and progressive race relations associated with such a system" (Smith 1994).

Most members of the school board and the Superintendent understood that the magnets, in the latter's words, "were not designed to improve the overall quality of instruction," but rather "to help us deal with the court ordered busing plan in a peaceful way" and "get a positive acceptance of an integrated school system rather than the negativism that is there now" (Murphy 1992). But critics of the magnet plan failed to make the distinction between a school improvement strategy and a pupil assignment plan a significant part of the public debate. To be against the magnets in much of Charlotte's public debate in early 1992 was to defend the busing plan against a widely-praised educational innovation, rather than to be against one particular form of pupil assignment and in favor of another (Smith 1994).

Although some widely respected African Americans supported the magnets, the most visible opposition to the plan came from African Americans who feared that the magnet plan would facilitate resegregation. In an attempt to alleviate these fears, the magnet plan was revised several times and the school board agreed to the formation of an advisory citizens group, the Committee of 25 (C25), to monitor the effect of the magnets especially on desegregation and resource allocation.

The end of the 1994-95 school year marked the third year of the magnet plan. These three years were also marked by many other changes. Among them are: a new system of goals and accountability, bonuses for teachers and schools who attain certain goals, an increase in the number of middle schools, the implementation of International Baccalaureate programs, changes in many aspects of the curriculum, the establishment of tougher discipline standards, and the replacement of a large number of CMS personnel--almost fifty per cent of the district's schools had new principals within two years of Murphy's arrival. Taken together, these constitute an ambitious and far ranging program of educational change which has drawn praise from some of the nation's

most influential proponents of school reform. However, a comprehensive evaluation of the extent to which these reforms have improved test scores, narrowed black-white gaps, increased the readiness for college and work, prepared students for the responsibilities of citizenship, and improved education in general is beyond the scope of this paper. In this paper, I will remain agnostic on almost all of these issues, and focus only on the political aspects of resegregation and school bond voting.

RESEGREGATION: DRIFTING INTO THE SCHOOLS AND OUT OF THE DEBATE?

As Orfield and his associates (1993, 1) have pointed out, southern schools have recently "turned back toward greater segregation" for the first time since 1954. The extent to which CMS is resegregating is a complicated topic. Even more so is a discussion of the various reasons why that resegregation may be taking place. Full consideration of both these topics is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, my goal is to provide merely suggestive evidence of a drift towards resegregation as a preface to a fuller discussion of an issue especially relevant in a panel devoted to the *politics* of urban education: at the same time two different citizens group have attempted to call the public's attention to this suggestive evidence of a drift toward resegregation in CMS's schools, concern with that issue has drifted out of the public debate. Not that this time period has been a tranquil one for CMS. Just the opposite is the case. As noted earlier, a May 1995 school bond referendum and its unexpected defeat rocked the district with controversy. Although money from these bonds would have built new schools, the location of which would almost certainly affect desegregation goals, discussion of this fact was largely absent from the public debate. In a district that prides itself on making school desegregation history in the 1970s and currently aspires to be the premier urban integrated school system in the nation, this absence commands special attention.

Drifting Toward Resegregation?

In July 1994, the C25--the watchdog citizens committee created by the school board when it adopted the magnet plan two years earlier--released two reports claiming that changes in the pupil assignment plan had created a number of losers as well as winners, that magnets were creaming from other schools (including those in naturally integrated areas), that a significant percentage of schools were projected to stay racially isolated, that others would become more racially isolated in the future, and that CMS was increasingly in danger of becoming a multi-tiered system (Committee of 25 1994a, 1994b). When the C25's reports were first prepared, the board's chair refused to accept it until after CMS staff had a chance to prepare a rebuttal, which it did (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Staff, 1994a, 1994b). In their reports, the CMS staff took issue with many of the C25's claims. Of particular relevance here were the staff's claims that schools

that became magnets ended up more, not less, integrated, and that most of the racial isolation noted by the C25 antedated the implementation of the magnet plan and/or was the result of "shifting demographics" rather than the school board's pupil assignment policy (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Staff 1994b, 16).

Two weeks after accepting both the C25 reports and the staff rebuttals, the school board voted by a one vote margin to dismiss the C25. In the view of the board's chair, the C25 was abusing its charge by trying to direct school board policy. In the view of another board member, Arthur Griffin, who voted against the dismissal motion, the board was killing the messenger who had brought the bad news (Stover 1994).

Because both the C25 and CMS staff were writing primarily for the school board, their reports assume familiarity with a wide range of issues including perhaps the racial composition of the student body at CMS's various schools. That topic, of particular relevance here, is addressed in a more straightforward manner by material that the League of Women Voters prepared for both the school board and public in late 1994. In a statement before the school board, the League argued that CMS "has two racially identifiable tiers" and that the schools "not only appear to be resegregating but also to be failing to provide an equal opportunity for excellence for all students" (League of Women Voters 1994b, 10). These claims were based on, among other things, a study of the racial composition of the student bodies in each of CMS's schools for three consecutive school years starting with 1991-92 (the year before the magnet plan was implemented) and ending with the second year that the magnet plan was in operation. Of particular relevance here is the League's claim that:

> across the three year period, with few exceptions, the whitest schools got whiter and the blackest schools got blacker whether they were elementary, middle, or high schools (League of Women Voters 1995a, 1)

This polarization was particularly sharp among the most racially distinct schools at the elementary and high school levels:

> ---- There are 77 elementary schools, fifty of which are above the system average of 40% black. Of those fifty, 34 became blacker over the three years the League studied. Even more important, of those fifty, ten are more than 55% black and thus out of compliance with court guidelines. All ten of these out-of-compliance schools "increased their black percentages, three by 11, 13, and 15 points." At the other end of the spectrum, there are ten schools that are less than 25% black. Of these ten, nine became whiter during the three years, and the tenth stayed the same.
>
> ---There are 11 high schools, five of which are above the system's black average. Four of these five became blacker during the period studied, and the blackest school--60%, which is 10% above the court boundary--moved 11 points in that direction in the three years under investigation. Only one of these five high schools lowered its black percentage, and that

> was because it became a magnet. At the other end of the spectrum, the whitest high school (75% white) moved 15 points in that direction in the three years (author's summary of League of Women Voters 1994a)

Perhaps the situation described by the League largely resulted from CMS policy as the C25 claimed. Perhaps the situation largely resulted from the "shifting demographics" to which the staff rebuttal to the C25 report alludes. And conceivably the League's analysis is wrong or misleading, though if that were the case, one might have expected CMS to issue a detailed response, given the large amount of effort the administration devotes to cultivating its public image and the fact that the League's analysis was based on CMS data that had been published in the *Charlotte Observer.* [3] In any case, the claims of both the C25 and League of Women Voters raise important issues about integration. Yet as the 1994-95 school year progressed, less and less public attention was devoted to questions of integration and de- or resegregation. This decreased public attention can be attributed to to a combination of the way the *Observer* has covered educational issues including the reports of the C25 and League, the decisions of various organizations and individuals to emphasize other issues, and the political void created by the dismissal of the C25.

Charlotte Observer Coverage of the C25 and League Reports

The city's only daily newspaper, the *Charlotte Observer* has an editorial stance which jibes nicely with Logan and Molotch's characterization of the metropolitan newspaper as the local business which "takes a broad responsibility for general growth machine goals" (1987, 70). Not surprisingly, the *Observer,* as Mead (1994) has shown, plays a key role in setting the local policy agenda. School reform was very much on the *Observer's* policy agenda from 1988-1992, a fact emphatically illustrated by its endorsements in school board elections, especially the pivotal one of 1988 in which the paper successfully called for "new faces, new leadership" (Smith 1994). Since 1992, support for CMS's reform program and Superintendent Murphy has just as emphatically been on the paper's agenda, one consequence of which has been the diminishing attention it has given to the question of resegregation and the organizations raising it.

Initial support for this claim of diminishing attention comes from the way the *Observer* has treated the dismissal of the C25 and the report from the League of Women Voters. In an editorial shortly after the C25 was dismissed, the paper did in fact call upon the board "to confront the policy issues raised by the committee" (*Charlotte Observer* 1994, 14A). But this criticism came at the end of an editorial that first saw fit to deal with grade requirements for athletes and sex education. These issues certainly concern the public, but one would be hard pressed to argue that they are anywhere near as momentous as those with which the C25 was dealing. At no time since that first editorial has the *Observer* repeated this call. Like the dismissal of the C25, the League's report was covered in the *Observer's* news pages, but it was was never mentioned on the

editorial pages. There was, it should be noted, ample opportunity for some sort of editorial comment about the League's concerns; a local celebration of the League's 75th anniversary drew extensive commentary from an editorial writer about the League's history, but no mention was made of its recent concerns about desegregation (Newsom 1994). Several days earlier a brief op-ed piece featured the historical reminiscences of a League member who championed desegregation while a member of the school board twenty years ago (Maulden 1994). Accompanying this op-ed piece was an invitation to attend a League-sponsored showing of a video celebrating the school desegregation battles of the 1970s. Again, however, no mention was made that the League now thought that CMS was drifting "toward blacker and whiter schools."

Additional evidence of the scant coverage accorded resegregation issues comes from the May 1995 school bond referendum. In addition to further illustrating the *Observer's* editorial stance, that bond campaign also calls attention to other reasons why resegregation concerns have been largely absent from the recent public debate about the schools.

The 1995 School Bond Referendum and the Drift in the Public Debate

Background

The 1995 school bond campaign was shaped by the two which immediately proceeded it. Prior to 1992, no school bond referendum had been defeated in at least thirty years. Furthermore, the four previous school bond referenda had passed by majorities of at least 60%. But in 1992, a school bond referendum had failed. The 1992 bonds--a relatively small $15 million-- would have converted an abandoned downtown department store into a magnet high school for finance and the arts. Although it received heavy support in the black community, the proposal received much less support in outlying white areas, even some that traditionally support school bonds. That lack of support was generally attributed to perceptions among these outlying white areas that the proposal was motivated much less by educational considerations than a desire to boost the downtown real estate market (Brown 1992).

Whereas the 1992 referendum was a vote about financing one particular school, the 1993 referendum was a much larger (the largest, up to that time, in CMS history) package amounting to $192 million which would be used to build seven new schools and renovate nine others. Because this referendum was the first large one to take place after the 1992 implementation of the magnet plan, the debate about the package was particularly intense, with attention focusing on the amount allocated for repairs/renovations versus the construction of new schools, and in what particular locations the new schools would be built. New school construction in CMS is supposedly governed by the "ten percent rule." Adopted during the initial debate about the magnets in an effort to alleviate fears that the magnets would facilitate resegregation, this rule places a priority on the construction of new schools in census tracts that are at least ten percent black or are adjacent to

tracts that are at least ten percent black. Because most of Charlotte's rapid growth is in outlying, overwhelmingly white areas areas increasingly distant from the heavily black central city areas, finding sites for these new schools tends to "complicate integration," as an *Observer* news story about the 1993 bonds indicated. The same story also noted that two of the proposed seven new schools to be built in predominantly white areas:

> are called midpoints, but at nearly 10 miles from uptown, the name is a misnomer. To integrate them, many black students will travel farther than whites.
>
> School board members last year promised to build all new schools in integrated areas. But later, they exempted the two southeast elementaries from the promise (O'Brien 1993, 20A).

In part because of the resegregation consequences of new school construction and in part because of a belief that insufficient money was allocated to repair, renovate, and enhance schools in predominantly black neighborhoods, Arthur Griffin, one of the two black members of the school board, publicly opposed the bonds and campaigned vigorously against them. The Black Political Caucus also opposed them. Their opposition had an effect despite strong public support for the bonds from the board's other black member, its chair, and from an influential black county commissioner. Only about 50% of those blacks who went to the polls voted for the school bonds, a much lower figure than in previous referenda. In fact, as Table I (to be discussed in depth in the paper's next section) indicates, the 1993 school bond referendum appears to be the only one of the past thirty-four Mecklenburg County referenda in which the percentage (approximately fifty) of blacks voting yes was lower than the percentage of whites voting yes. In part because of such uncustomarily low black support, the 1993 bonds passed by only a 51% margin. But they did in fact pass, partially because the support of the school board chair and county commissioner noted above kept the black yes vote from dropping below fifty percent. That fact affected the political positions that would be taken, especially by Arthur Griffin, in the 1995 bond campaign.

As a result of the 1992 defeat and the close call in 1993, there were political pressures to include something for many different segments of the community in the 1995 school bond package. The needs of the school system--or at least what the school board perceived as these needs--also augured for a large package for a wide range of renovation, repair, and new school construction projects. Auguring in just the opposite direction, however, were the 1994 county elections which mirrored those throughout the country. Although no school board seats were at stake, all of those on the county commission were, with the result that Republicans opposed to any tax increase gained a 5-4 majority. Especially noteworthy was the victory of a relative newcomer in Charlotte politics, a self-identified conservative Christian named Tom Bush, who became the vice-chair of the commission. This election had important consequences for CMS's finances because it, like school boards throughout North Carolina, cannot levy taxes and hence must rely on the county commission to issue bonds and provide a significant portion (in 1995, about 30%) of

yearly operating expenses.

As a result of the conflicting priorities of the school board and Republican majority on the county commission, early 1995 witnessed a complicated set of negotiations among the school board, county commission, chamber of commerce, various organizations, and a range of concerned citizens about the size and composition of the bond package. Particularly important in the resolution of these negotiations was the county's Citizens Capital Advisory Budget Committee which provided the commissioners with an independent assessment of the needs of the schools. Chaired by a local developer and composed mostly of business executives, this eleven member committee whittled the school board's proposal down by approximately seven percent to $304 million. A majority of the commission accepted this proposal and agreed to put it before the public in a special election on May 30. Of the two commissioners who voted against the authorization, only Bush announced he would publicly fight against passage, grandiloquently proclaiming, "I'm up against Hugh McColl [chairman and CEO of NationsBank, the city's largest and country's third largest banking company]; I'm up against the chamber of commerce; I am up against all the PTAs (Ball 1995, 4c). Together with a conservative citizens group that has been vociferously challenging local taxing and spending priorities since 1987, Bush spearheaded the campaign against the bonds. Their campaign pivoted on claims of the school board's lack of financial accountability, the anticipated tax increase from these bonds, and the projected future capital needs of the schools which, they argued, would dwarf the amount of the 1995 bond package. Contrary to published preelection polls, the school bonds failed (by a 51-49 margin), but two smaller and less controversial issues passed. The loss at the polls was a major defeat for both the school board and growth machine and, in the view at least of Superintendent Murphy, jeopardized key aspects of CMS's school reform agenda (Chandler 1995). Below I discuss some of the implications of this defeat , but now I focus on the how little of the public debate about the school bonds dealt with the resegregation/new school nexus.

The Resegregation Issue that Wasn't

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE: Just as the 1993 bond referendum had called attention to the relationship between school construction and resegregation, so apparently, too, would the 1995 bonds which ended up proposing the construction of nine new schools, at least five, and maybe eight, of which might have ended up in heavily if not overwhelmingly white areas.[4] Long before the final package was approved by the county commission, the implications of such construction were noted by the *Leader,* a weekly newspaper that is targeted towards affluent whites and provides high quality and in depth coverage of educational issues. In mid-December, in a front page article headlined "Big school bond issue could alter integration policies" the *Leader* noted how exceptions to the ten percent rule were "becoming more commonplace" and that "exceptions may reflect the realities of real estate in an increasingly urban county," but that the "real trade-off

may be building schools in hard-to-integrate areas in exchange for bond votes" (T. Mitchell 1994, 6). While this weekly newspaper may have raised the issue of how the 1995 bonds would affect integration very early in the public discussion, the *Observer*, in contrast to its treatment of the bonds in 1993, never did. In almost six months of the paper's coverage of the 1995 bond referendum, the resegregation/school construction issue never appeared on any of its news, feature, or editorial pages. A computer search of all 1995 *Observer* articles using as key words various combinations of bond/bonds and resegregation/desegregation/integration reveals only one article of relevance: an op-ed piece by a leading opponent of the bonds which gibes at integration as "social engineering" (Barnes 1995).

The *Observer's* lack of attention to questions of resegregation during the campaign may be partially explained by the paper's enthusiastic support for the bonds. This lack of attention may also be partially explained by the paper's generic support for CMS's reform agenda. But these explanations are only part of the story. While the paper may play a major role in helping set the local policy agenda, it certainly does not control it. Furthermore, the paper prides itself on its receptivity to different viewpoints, and both its op-ed page and letters to the editor section traditionally provide space for a reasonably diverse set of local viewpoints. Consequently, there are additional reasons why the relation between new school construction and desegregation received virtually no coverage from the *Observer*. Most of these additional reasons boil down to the fact that during six months of debate about the bonds few, if any, of the organizations and individuals traditionally associated with desegregation concerns introduced the school construction/desegregation nexus into the public debate, and not one publicly advocated opposing the bonds on those grounds.

BLACK LEADERS AND THE BONDS: There was, however, private advocacy as well as discussion about the possibility of public opposition to the bonds on these grounds. Much of this private discussion appears to have been among blacks. For example, community activist and C25 member Norman Mitchell, who was one of the two blacks on the Citizens Capital Advisory Budget Committee--the committee whose recommendations were instrumental in determining the final size of the bond package--was well aware of the resegregation/school construction nexus. Suggesting that the ten percent rule had become a *de facto* ninety percent rule (i.e., no school would be built in a census tract less than ninety percent white), Mitchell noted:

> I did not have a problem with the money ...but I did have a problem with the location and building of the new schools. I think more emphasis should be placed on bringing existing schools up to par because if you look at the new schools that have been built over the past five, six, seven years [they are] mostly in the outlying areas, in predominantly white areas (N. Mitchell 1995).

While the committee agreed with Mitchell and other members about the importance of preserving the renovation and repair components of the package, it largely rejected his concerns

about new schools. That rejection, in his view, was decisive. Feeling that the "main key was the building of the new schools," he took his objections to a community organization, the Westside PAC, an organization aimed at advancing the interests of the part of Charlotte traditionally seen as receiving the short end of many policy sticks.[5] A majority of the Westside PAC voted to support the bonds:

> But they only saw one side of the bonds....I told them, do you see what you are doing? You are going to vote for some schools within the west side to have their roof or plumbing fixed, and by voting for this, you vote to build new schools over in southeast Charlotte [a very heavily white section of the county] (N.Mitchell 1995).

Concerns similar to Mitchell's were shared by other black leaders. As a result, some of them, including at least one other black member of the C25, refused to support the bonds. But the most visible African American leaders in Charlotte ended up supporting the bonds largely because of commitments from the school board and business leaders to carry out all the renovations and repairs promised in the bonds package as well as give priority to ten inner city school in assigning this work. Given concerns that money for repairs/renovations in previous bond packages had not been spent as promised, a written commitment on these repairs and renovations was judged particularly important. In an interview with a reporter from the *Charlotte Post*, the city's black weekly newspaper, the (white) Duke Power vice-president who headed the privately financed bond task force emphasized to the black community that "for the first time, there is a comprehensive, documented [list]...and that's how you get the assurance of accountability in elected officials" (White 1995, 3A).[6] It was these commitments that got support for the bonds from a representative of the Black Political Caucus and other members of an ad hoc group of black leaders that met with both school officials and the representatives of the chamber of commerce to negotiate these issues. It also got the support of the *Charlotte Post's* editor, who, in his endorsement, made a point of emphasizing that he had opposed the bonds in 1993 because of a lack of accountability and planning at that time (Johnson 1995). Nowhere does the *Post's* editorial even allude to resegregation concerns.

Finally, school board member Arthur Griffin who had opposed the 1993 bonds also signed on to the 1995 package. Quoted two days before the election as saying, "I put my neck on the line in endorsing this," (Mara 1995b, 12A), Griffin's support was based on the belief that 1995 was different from 1993 because "this time they didn't take one dime out of renovations. That's the big difference from 1993 to 1995" (Mara, 1995a, 8B). He subsequently indicated that he "clearly recognized what putting nine new schools in the suburbs will do" and his continued belief that a "desegregated school system is ideal." But, in his view, the situation is different from what it was in the 1970s. The progressive white people who fought the desegregation fight for twenty years are "just tired; they aren't calling school board members...they aren't coming before the board in

public meetings" and are not engaged in politics the way they used to be:

> Maybe they're out there and just asleep. Maybe they recognize that the Trade and Tryon Street [the heart of downtown] crowd is not as supportive as they used to be in '72, but they aren't out there, for whatever the reason, on any level, and when we got rid of the Committee of 25 that was it (Griffin 1995).

On the other hand, the people who "are coming before the board, going out in groups" are those who say "leave me alone, leave me in my neighborhood." Given that political situation and the passage, despite his public and visible opposition, of the 1993 bond package, Griffin likened his 1995 position to someone who sees "this big bulldozer coming, you try to figure out what to do ,what to salvage. I'm in like a salvaging operation right now" (Griffin 1995). For the 1995 bonds, a key aspect of this "salvaging operation" was intensive bargaining to secure commitments for an unprecedented renovation/repair package for central city schools in both black and mixed neighborhoods.

THE LEAGUE, THE C25 , AND THE POLITICAL VOID: Given Griffin's observations about the paucity of white people who remain "out there" on desegregation issues, the activities of Charlotte's League of Women Voters around the 1995 bonds merits special attention because, as its December 1994 report indicates, it remains concerned with desegregation. As an organization, the League rarely takes positions on any bond issues. Among the League members, there was, according to its president Betty Seizinger, many concerns that the money allocated for the repair and renovation of older, primarily black, schools would be spent in other ways, but overall the membership supported the bonds. To Seizinger, the 1995 school bond package was about the best that could be expected from this school board because it answered the "questions of the black community about repairs and renovations," in a way that had never been done before. That commitment was important, "a big enough sop, if you will." Emphasizing that the League was virtually alone nowadays in continuing to raise resegregation concerns, Seizinger noted, "We are also not going to beat a dead horse." Had the League come out and said "we don't think you should support the bonds because the placing of those five schools jeopardizes our ability to integrate the school system....I don't think we would have had any impact" (Seizinger 1995).

Compounding the consequences of the activities and decisions of these various other individuals and organizations to support and/or not take a public position on the bonds was the withering away of the C25 as an organizational presence in local educational affairs. While, as Arthur Griffin noted, traditional desegregation activists may be "tired" and no longer "out there," the school board's decision (which he opposed) to dismiss the C25 provides a classic example of how action by the state can facilitate such political withdrawal and fatigue by those who might otherwise be more apt to challenge its policy.

A month after its September, 1994 dismissal, many of the C25's leading members joined with the Black Political Caucus in calling a meeting to present the committee's findings to the public and discuss plans for continuing to address them. Despite the general agreement among the approximately thirty people at the meeting on such a need, the meeting had few concrete consequences. Nine months later, in July 1995, many members attended a reunion barbecue, reminisced on the organization's history, and discussed ways of supporting various candidates, including some C25 members, in the upcoming November, 1995 school board elections. But there was no discussion of collectively trying to follow through on the C25's original mission and the concerns voiced in the committee's two reports. The noteworthy unity, fellowship, and spirit of the barbecue notwithstanding, it seemed to mark the demise of the C25 as a distinctive organizational presence in local educational affairs.

It is certainly not unprecedented for organizations to wither away when deprived of the legitimacy that comes from being an officially recognized governmental body. However, such a demise might not have been confidently predicted when the school board peremptorily dismissed the C25 in September, 1994. Nominated by individual members of the school board, the membership of the C25 included many people with a wide range of political experience. The C25's chair for much of its existence was a local business executive who 35 years ago was a pioneer in the civil rights movement. Several C25 members were well-seasoned in the nitty-gritty of local politics, having been elected at various times to citywide office. Others had extensive experience in PTAs and other educational organizations.

In terms of race, occupation, political ideology, and neighborhood in which they lived, the members of the C25 were considerably more diverse than the board which chose them. Despite that initial diversity, the C25 developed during its two year existence a cohesion, spirit, and unity of purpose that virtually all its members have remarked. Norman Mitchell, who has served in a variety of capacities on many different civic committees, calls it "the best committee that I have ever worked on" (N. Mitchell 1995), and many other members have commented on the distinctive nature of the committee's spirit and how an overriding concern with the well-being of all of CMS's students came to unite the membership. One small indication of this unity comes from looking at the membership of the subcommittee which prepared the report indicating that the district's new pupil assignment plan was leading toward a "multi-tiered" system with a significant percentage of schools projected to remain racially isolated." Eight of the ten members on it were white, and its chair was a small businessman living in one of the county's outlying, overwhelmingly white areas. These are not the kinds of demographics ordinarily associated in Charlotte or elsewhere with a deep concern for educational equity.

If the C25 or some version thereof had managed to maintain an autonomous existence after its dismissal, would it have wanted or been able to inject the resegregation/school construction into the debate about the 1995 school bonds? That is the kind of what-if question for which even a tentative answer is very hard to provide. But one anecdotal piece of evidence suggests how, at a

minimum, the withering away of the C25 deprived Charlotte-Mecklenburg of an interracial forum in which such issues might have been addressed. In discussion at the C25 July barbecue with a white member of the pupil assignment committee who had also supported the bond package, the author opined that a voter might have opposed the bonds for reasons this person might have considered "good ones," i.e., that they would have facilitated resegregation. This person remarked that was the first time s/he'd ever heard that opinion voiced; all the people s/he knew who opposed the bonds did so on fiscal grounds, reasons s/he considered "bad," given CMS's needs. Had the C25 not withered away, this person, at a minimum, would almost certainly been exposed to this different reason for opposing the bonds in dialogue with some of the black members of the C25. The extent to which such an exchange of views would have gone beyond the committee and affected the broader public debate about the bonds can only be conjectured. However, there is little doubt that in dismissing the C25 ten months earlier, the school board, whether intentionally or not, deprived Charlotte-Mecklenburg of an organization whose membership--by virtue of the diversity in its background and cohesion in its outlook--was in a unique position to try to bring resegregation issues to the public's attention.

This anecdote also illustrates another, probably more fundamental, aspect of the the 1995 school bond campaign. In the absence of any organization raising the resegregation/school construction link, the public debate was largely defined by the financial affordability/accountability challenge issued by the conservative Christian County Commissioner Tom Bush, various conservative organizations, and their allies. In responding to that challenge, the bond supporters argued that the schools were more accountable than ever and that financial pain would be minimal. In support of this last claim, *Observer* ran several long articles about the relative lightness of Charlotte's tax burden compared to similar cities. Much of the way the public debate was defined is exemplified by the paper's four-column, front page headline the Sunday before the referendum, "School needs vs. higher taxes" (Mara 1995b). Given that issue definition and the absence of any conflicting ones, traditional desegregation proponents would likely come down on the side of "school needs," especially because of the other political and cultural differences between them and those to whom property tax rates and fiscal accountability were the overriding issues.

SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS? At this time, several months after the defeat of the school bonds in May 1995, it is much too early to tell whether the previous six month's drift in the public debate will persist, though little in recent events would lead one to expect otherwise. It may even be too early to ascertain whether the drift in the racial composition of CMS's schools suggested by the League's report does in fact exist and, if so, whether it too will persist. To the extent these drifts persist, many will undoubtedly attribute them to the "shifting demographics" to which the staff of CMS alluded in its reply to the C25. Perhaps the explosive growth of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's outlying, white areas makes school desegregation a more difficult technical problem than it was a generation earlier. But any explanation that rests content with calling attention to "shifting demographics" begs the question of the extent to which today's demographic

"inevitability" resulted from yesterday's political decisions about how to desegregate education, where to build schools, where to locate public housing, how (and whether) to encourage low income private housing, and so forth. In fact, the 1995 school bond campaign is a fine example of how today's political decision could very well have been tomorrow's demographic inevitability. Had the bonds passed and the new schools been built in these outlying areas, they would almost certainly have facilitated the kind of additional residential development which once again could be explained as the result of "shifting demographics."

The complicated relation between political decisions and demographic trends aside, the drifts in the public debate and the schools' racial composition, if they persist, pose serious questions about the future of desegregated education in a district at one time hailed as a pioneer in this area. The seriousness of these questions and their political implications are best considered after a discussion of recent trends in school bond voting.

SCHOOL BONDS AND THE COALITION FOR SCHOOL REFORM

At the same time resegregation concerns are drifting out of the public debate, the complexities of urban school governance suggest one of the ways in which blacks in Charlotte-Mecklenburg may be able to affect some of the marginalization associated with this drift. Effective school governance--indeed, governance in any area--is facilitated by a stable coalition capable of providing the necessary political support. In fact, a key aspect of contemporary research (e.g., the NSF-funded Civic Capacity and Urban Education project) on the politics of urban education is the investigation of how such support can be built among different sectors of the community. An important component of this support in Charlotte-Mecklenburg is the public's willingness to vote in favor of school bonds. The unexpected May, 1995 defeat of a school bond package calls dramatic attention to the need to understand the developments which affect public support for school bonds.

To begin that study, this section of the paper investigates referenda in the past ten years with the aim of comparing black and white support for school bonds before and after the start of school reform in 1992. That investigation will show a significant decline in black support since 1992. To the extent the most parsimonious explanation of this decline is black dissatisfaction with CMS policy since 1992, the story of school reform in Charlotte-Mecklenburg takes an especially ironic twist: the very change in the pupil assignment plan designed to enhance support among whites for CMS's reform agenda may have cost the district support among that segment of the population, African Americans, otherwise most likely to support the financing of it.

Methodology

I examine voting on all relevant school bond referenda (N=6) that have taken place in the

past ten years.[7] Because I wish to make inferences about how voting on these school bond referenda reflects views about educational issues as opposed to, say, more generic ones about government spending, I also investigate voting on all the other (N=28) Mecklenburg County referenda that took place in the same years as these six school bond referenda.[8] Since there is no appropriate survey data, I rely on aggregate precinct voting statistics. In an attempt to minimize the well-known problems of making inferences about group voting patterns from aggregate data, I use two distinct and independent methodologies--ecological regression and a comparison of homogeneous precincts--to estimate how blacks and whites voted. Of course, as a way of unambiguously ascertaining group voting patterns throughout a jurisdiction, each of these methods has its shortcomings. An analysis of racially homogeneous precincts provides unambiguous data about how members of that race in those precincts voted, but can leave unanswered questions about voting behavior in racially heterogeneous precincts. Ecological regression uses data from all precincts, but raises "the possibility of errors owing to ecological inference" (Grofman, Handley, and Niemi 1992, 89).[9] Given the respective strengths and weaknesses of each method, "a standard procedure is to use them both" as well as to employ common sense checks such as known jurisdiction wide vote totals (Grofman et al. 1992, 89). In addition to its ongoing use by political scientists and historians (e.g., Grofman et al. 1992, Lichtman 1979), this combination of techniques has, since the Supreme Court's 1986 decision in *Thornburg* v.*Gingles*, been increasingly used in federal courtrooms (Grofman et al. 1992, 84).

My criteria for precinct homogeneity were strict. For each of the six referendum years, I chose only those precincts in which whites comprised at least 99% of the registered voters and blacks at least 98%. Those cutoff points yielded, in each of the six years, two groups of homogeneous precincts in which the number of registered voters of the numerically dominant race comprised at least fifteen percent of the countywide total registration of that race. The ecological regression estimates, generously provided by Ted Arrington, Steve Coppola, and the Urban Institute, all of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, were computed according to the procedure summarized by Grofman et al. (1992, 85). While the data for both techniques were drawn from the same publicly available reports at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Elections, they were entered by different individuals into two different databases and analyzed independently.

Results

Table I lists each of the referenda and provides the results from the homogeneous precinct analysis and the ecological regression. In general, the two methodologies provide quite similar estimates, with the only major cause for concern being in 1995. Since the school bonds failed but a majority of voters in both the black and white homogeneous precincts supported the bonds, it is clear that support for the bonds in the racially heterogeneous precincts was lower for, at a

minimum, either blacks or whites, and perhaps both. However, the estimates from the homogeneous precincts exceed those from the ecological regression for all three issues that were on the ballot in 1995. This fact suggests that, whatever the sources of the differences between homogeneous and heterogeneous precincts, they had systematic aspects and will tend to cancel out when the non-school referenda are used as a control. In any case, as will become apparent, both methodologies produce similar results.

Figure I plots the school bond data contained in Table I for both blacks and whites. As is clear from visual inspection, the two methodologies provide largely similar results: both indicate a large drop by both races in support for school bonds after 1992. However, it is necessary to see whether this drop is unique to school bonds. Figure II displays trends in the average per cent yes vote for all non-school bonds from 1985-95 and shows there has also been a generic drop in support for these bonds as well as for school bonds. To control for this generic drop, I compute for each year the ratio of the per cent yes vote on school bonds to average per cent yes vote on all other bonds. Trends in this ratio are displayed in Figure III. This figure clearly indicates that there is a drop in black and white support for school bonds relative to others bonds, and that the drop is, proportionately speaking, much larger for blacks than it is for whites. To get a more precise measure of these drops, the data displayed in each of these three figures can be divided into pre- and post-1992 groups, and averages values computed for the two time periods The results of these computations are presented in Table II. They suggest that the drop in black support for school bonds, controlling for the generic drop in support for all bonds, was about twice as large as the drop in white support for school bonds.

Discussion of school bond voting

Although they provide only estimates, the two different and independently conducted analyses (ecological regression and homogeneous precincts) lead to very similar results, thus increasing confidence in the validity of the conclusions about the decline in support for school bonds. At this point, however, it is important to distinguish between the theoretical significance of the drop in support by both groups and the larger drop among blacks.

The drop in support by *both* groups for school bonds relative to other bonds could have several explanations. One might be dissatisfaction with CMS policy since 1992. A second might be that the CMS bond packages have cost more than others on the ballot. The data provide little ground for distinguishing between these two explanations, and I shall make no attempt to try. However, the fact that black support dropped much more than white support is very difficult to explain by the financial size of the bond packages. If anything, one would expect concerns about the cost of the bonds and presumed increases in the property tax to disproportionately influence the white vote because in Charlotte, as in many other places, virtually every leader of the property tax relief movement is white. Consequently, the most parsimonious single explanation of the

larger decline among blacks is dissatisfaction with some aspects of CMS policy since 1992.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely which aspects of CMS policy might have contributed to this distinctive black dissatisfaction, especially on the basis of aggregate voting data. It would link this paper's two main arguments very neatly together to attribute the decline in black support for school bonds to the marginalization discussed earlier. The 1993 school bond referendum does indeed provide suggestive evidence of that linkage. That referendum, it will be recalled, was the one in which school board member Arthur Griffin publicly fought against passage of the bonds because, in his view, they facilitated resegregation. His opposition got the support of the Black Political Caucus and is almost certainly the reason the 1993 school bond referendum appears to be the only one of the 34 referenda studied herein in which the percentage yes vote was smaller for blacks than for whites. However, to conclusively demonstrate the link between marginalization and school bond voting would require considerably more evidence, especially about public opinion, than is presently available.

The absence of such evidence notwithstanding, if the post-1992 decline in black support for school bonds continues in future referenda, CMS's reform agenda may face further difficulty. Not only does the district still pride itself on attempting to satisfy black aspirations, but a higher percentage of blacks than whites have traditionally supported school bonds. Although blacks constitute only about 24% of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's electorate, their votes, given the closeness of the 1995 vote, could very well be decisive in future referenda. The significance and content of these future bond packages will likely be affected by the same developments which have produced the drift in the public debate discussed earlier.

CONCLUSION: THE CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG COMPROMISE?

I have focused on recent events in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, in particular the May 1995 school bond referendum, in order to develop two arguments: (i) at the same time there is suggestive evidence of a drift towards resegregation in CMS, concern with that topic has drifted out of the public debate and (ii) since the initiation of CMS's magnet plan and school reform agenda, there has been a sharp drop in the percentage of blacks who vote in favor of school bonds. Let me now elaborate upon the significance of the first as a way of discussing some of the implications of the second.

There are basically two reasons why the resegregation implications of new school construction were not part of the public controversy about the 1995 bonds. The first is the activities of various individuals and organizations. Of particular relevance are those of Arthur Griffin, the school board member who two years earlier had broken ranks with his colleagues on the board (including its other black member) to publicly fight against the 1993 bonds which, in his view, provided insufficient money for central city schools and would have facilitated resegregation. His opposition persuaded some other black leaders (though certainly not all) to also take a stand against

the bonds, and is almost certainly the reason the 1993 school bond referendum was the only one of the 34 investigated in this paper in which the percentage of support among blacks was lower than that among whites. Despite that opposition, the bonds secured approximately fifty percent of the black vote and passed by a narrow margin. With the events of 1993 in mind and sensing that many whites were no longer "out there" in desegregation battles, Griffin likened his position to that of a "salvaging operation," and helped negotiate an unprecedented renovation/repair package for central city schools, including those in mixed as well as black neighborhoods. Consequently, though fully aware of the resegregation implications of the construction of perhaps as many as eight of the new schools in the bond package, he supported it. Similar reasoning governed the approach of many other black leaders and organizations, as well, as best as can be determined, the membership of the League of Women Voters, the one predominantly white organization that was still demonstrably "out there" as far as desegregation concerns go. Perhaps the organization that might have been in the best position to call attention to the resegregation/school construction nexus had it so wanted was the C25, but it, for all practical purposes, no longer existed. Dismissed by the board six months earlier, it was withering away and lacked the organizational capacity for any focused political intervention.

To be fully understood, the activities of these various organizations and individuals need to be put in the broader context exemplified by the second reason resegregation concerns were largely absent from the 1995 bond campaign: the *Charlotte Observer* took no steps to raise them nor to vigorously fight the dismissal of the C25. Given the *Observer's* role in facilitating an end to Charlotte's busing plan as well as supporting the current magnet plan (and the other items in CMS's reform agenda) (Smith 1994), the newspaper's lack of initiative may not be all that surprising, but it surely is important. Among other things it exemplifies the fact that desegregation concerns are no longer anywhere near as high on the growth machine's agenda as they were twenty years ago. In many ways, the drift in the public debate in Charlotte reflects the shift in growth machine political priorities as Charlotte's political economy and regime have changed so dramatically in the past decade. In the absence of any mass local political insurgency with an opposing agenda, growth machine priorities have heavily influenced both educational policy and the political debate. In 1992, there was enough organized public concern about desegregation to secure appointment of the C25 as a condition for acceptance of the magnet plan. But two years later, when the watchdog was put to sleep for having the temerity to bark, there was little left to fill the political void.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Compromise?

The bargain which Arthur Griffin and other black leaders negotiated was the acceptance of a likely increase in resegregation in exchange for an unprecedented commitment of resources for central city schools, many of them heavily black, some mixed. Although similar bargains have

been made in many other districts in many other times, these developments in Charlotte-Mecklenburg especially invite comparisons with Atlanta, the city 250 miles down I-85 with which Charlotte, at least in the minds of the leaders of its growth machine, has been playing catch-up since the 1970s.[10] Yet there was one area in which even the most ardent Charlotte chauvinist never felt any need to emulate Atlanta: school desegregation. In the same years that Charlotte was adopting and eventually embracing a widely-hailed busing plan, Atlanta was embarking on a very different course. This course, often dubbed the Atlanta Compromise in the school desegregation literature, is the bargain in which blacks gained control of the city's schools in exchange for arrangements that left many schools segregated (Orfield 1991, 104). The many differences between the metropolitan areas and school systems notwithstanding, Charlotte's path, so different in 1972, would now seem, if the bond campaign of 1995 is a harbinger of future events, to be converging with Atlanta's. Given the smaller size of the Charlotte metropolitan area and the fact that the school system covers all of Mecklenburg county, the bargain in CMS is less one about governing structures *per se*, but of assurance of additional and appropriate resources for primarily black schools in exchange for the acceptance of overwhelmingly white schools in rapidly growing outlying areas. And, again if the bond campaign of 1995 is any kind of portent, many of the terms of the bargain may very well be negotiated in the bond packages that get put before the public.

It is in this context that the marked decline in the traditionally high black support for recent schools bonds is especially important. At least two sets of actors could have a stake in its reversal. The first is obviously black political and educational leaders. To the extent they agree among themselves and then mobilize a large black vote, their position in bargaining over bond packages with school officials, the chamber of commerce, and other actors would presumably be enhanced. The chamber and other growth machine elites would also have an interest in such a reversal. As the 1993 and 1995 referenda make clear, they are in need of more reliable allies in school bond referenda than they have recently had. Such speculations bring to mind the growth machine-black leadership coalition which characterized Charlotte's regime until about 1987. As indicated earlier, that earlier regime is in disarray, and in the partisan battles that characterize city elections that coalition has lost most of its clout. But in the nonpartisan, more fluid political environment that characterizes bond campaigns an alliance--if only on matters involving educational finances--between the growth machine and leadership of the black community could be part of a much larger pro-bond coalition whose basic terms would constitute the Charlotte-Mecklenburg compromise.

The extent to which such a compromise will serve the needs of the district's students--especially its black students--is problematic. Neither the history of education in Atlanta (Orfield 1991) nor much of that of Milliken II schools (Feldman et al. 1994) gives rise to great optimism. But in a district in which black students have always borne a disproportionate share of the busing burden, many people might be willing to try such a Charlotte-Mecklenburg compromise, especially given longstanding doubts about the extent to which CMS's current as well as past pupil

assignment plans have advanced the education of minority children. Conceivably in a county whose electorate is only about 24% black (though whose public school population is 40% black), such a compromise might be the best for which Charlotte-Mecklenburg's African Americans can hope, especially given the nationwide political climate, the absence in Charlotte of any mass political insurgency, and the significant decline in support for desegregation by Charlotte's growth machine. In fact, just as Charlotte's busing plan reflected the pre-1987 regime in which the coalition between the growth machine and the leadership of the black community was so important, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg compromise in educational policy would reflect the contemporary fluid regime in which the growth machine is paying attention to the many new entrants in the political arena. Given the decisive role the growth machine has played in educational policy for the past 25 years (Smith 1994), the 1995 drift of desegregation from the center of the page to the margins of public discourse seems to flow all too inevitably from the 1992 decision to dismantle the busing plan and implement the magnet school program.

In the competition for mobile capital, good press, and a progressive image, Charlotte never managed to come up with a slogan as catchy as Atlanta's "A city too busy to hate." But in its school system's goal of aspiring to be the nation's premier, urban integrated public school system, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has a mission as lofty as that of any district in the country. Yet if the suggestive drifts in pupil assignment and public discussion continue, one must fear that CMS might more candidly aspire to be merely the nation's premier resegregated urban district. However, one must also fear, whatever may happen in bond package negotiations, that change in aspiration may go largely unremarked in public discourse.

NOTES

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1. For a recent discussion of the importance of paying attention to the extent to which a "unitary" view of black interests, needs, and demands varies in both time and space, see Sonenshein 1994.

2. Of particular interest in upcoming months will be November's school board elections and vote on a smaller version of the bond package that voters turned down in May. While predictions are invariably risky, it appears, initially at least, that both the election and and bond campaigns will largely resemble the events of the past twelve months in which resegregation concerns drifted out of public discourse

The 1995 school board election will be the first in which some (six) candidates will be elected from districts and the remainder (three) at-large; previously all nine were elected at large. Black incumbent Arthur Griffin, whose activities have been pivotal in recent events and which are discussed at length below, is running at-large and unlikely to modify any of his recent positions which, in addition to being firmly grounded in his own beliefs (see below) also make sense from a tactical point of view in a school district in which approximately 75 per cent of the voters are white. Among the other candidates are at least four whites who have been longtime and visible proponents of integration. One of these four is running at large, and the other three are running in districts that are predominantly white. Consequently, while each may be taking a principled stand on issues of educational equity, none, from the point of view of getting votes, would appear to have a vested interest in pushing desegregation issues to the forefront of public discussion.

Anticipating events in the campaign for the trimmed-down bond package is more difficult. One of the big cuts was the elimination of the one (out of a total of nine) new schools--an industrial arts high school-- that would presumably have been built in or near predominantly black sections of Charlotte. That cut may indeed erode black support for what I view as the harbinger of CMS's version of the Atlanta Compromise of 1973 (see below), but as of mid-August, there was little public evidence of such erosion.

3. In news coverage of an earlier League report on resegregation, school officials' response was similar to the one made to the Committee of 25: the magnet program had brought more schools within desegregation guidelines and that "the change cited by the League is caused by population shifts" (Mara 1994a, 12C). The chair of the school board responded to the December, 1994 report by affirming CMS's commitment to integration (Mara 1994c), but the League never received any reply, public or private, that dealt with the specifics of its report (Seizinger 1995).

4. Political considerations and the operation of the real estate market combine to place a premium on a certain vagueness about school site selection during most bond campaigns. Of the nine schools proposed for construction in the 1995 bond package, one, a technical high school, was

slated for the central city, and three others were slated for a multi-school educational village in the rapidly growing northeast part of the county. The exact sites of the remaining five were not specified in the plans for the bond package, but were understood to be destined for very heavily white regions in various southern and northern rapidly growing regions of the county (Mara and Breisacher 1995).

The above mentioned education village is in an area that, while heavily white, contains a relatively larger black population than other outlying northern and southern regions. But, in the view of some, such as school board member Arthur Griffin, the earlier decision to build this education village, doomed efforts to maintain an integrated student body at West Charlotte, a central city high school whose desegregation in the 1970s was a pivotal contribution to the success of Charlotte's busing plan (Griffin 1995, Gaillard 1988).

5. Although its economic diversity increases as Charlotte-Mecklenburg continues to grow, the west side includes virtually all of Charlotte's heavily black neighborhoods as well as many of its white working class ones.

6. The role of the chamber of commerce in the negotiations that secured the support of these black leaders adds to the evidence in earlier research (Mickelson, Ray, and Smith 1994; Smith 1994) of the importance of Charlotte's growth machine elite in local educational politics.

7. Omitted from my analysis is a 1992 school bond issue. There are three reasons for the omission. First unlike the other six school bond issues that I examine, it appeared as the only county bond issue on the ballot in 1992, and as subsequent analysis will indicate, I use voting for other bond referenda as a control. Second, the 1992 referendum took place only 2 1/2 months after the start of a school year, too close to implementation of the magnet plan--easily the most salient aspect of CMS's school reform agenda--to provide meaningful data for analysis that seeks to investigate the effects of school reform. Third, unlike the other referenda in this study which covered a variety of projects, the 1992 bonds would have been used exclusively to convert an abandoned downtown department store into a magnet high school for finance and the arts. The defeat of the 1992 school bonds was generally viewed as at least partially reflecting hostility of white voters on Charlotte's periphery to downtown (Brown 1992), and to that extent is not a very good indication of general attitudes about local education.

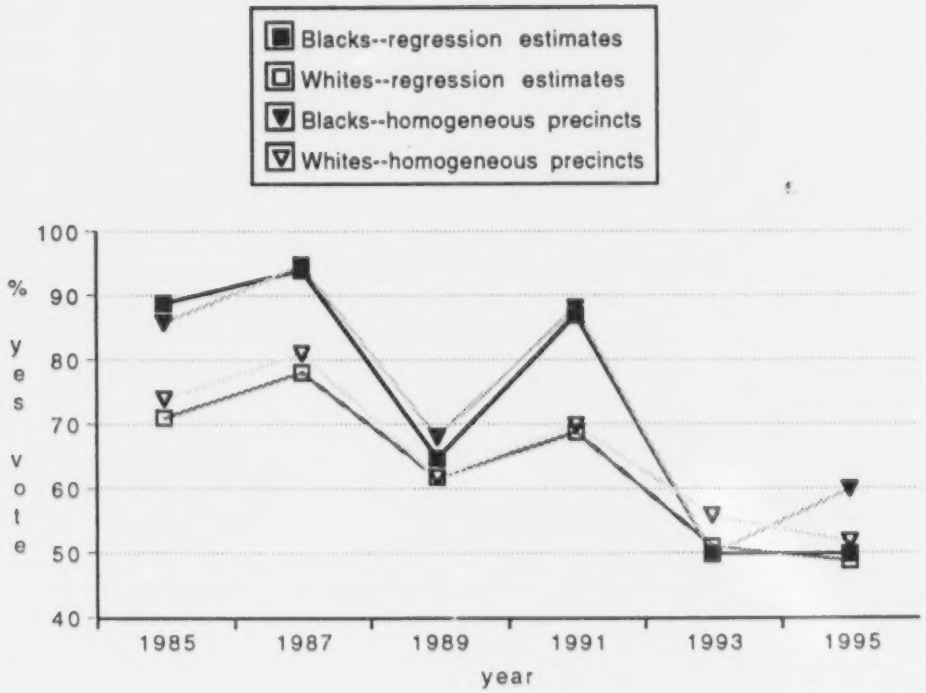
8. Since CMS, as mentioned earlier, has no taxing power, it must rely on the county to issue bonds.

9. For a discussion of the many issues involved in the use of ecological regression see Rubinfeld 1991 as well as Grofman et al. 1992. As the latter indicates (p. 91), the goodness of fit for an ecological regression can be checked with Pearson's r. Two of the ecological regressions for school bond votes yield extremely low r's. For this reason, the ecological regression estimates presented herein are best viewed as a rough check on the estimates derived from the homogeneous precincts.

10. Another obvious comparison is with Prince George's County, Maryland, the district led by John Murphy before he became CMS's superintendent. In its desegregation plan, the school board agreed to provide extra compensation to Milliken II schools "in exchange for the NAACP's promise that plaintiffs would not challenge the racial imbalances in those schools." (Feldman, Kirby, Eaton and Morantz 1994, 40). For additional discussion of educational policy in Prince George's County, see Johnson 1995.

Figure I

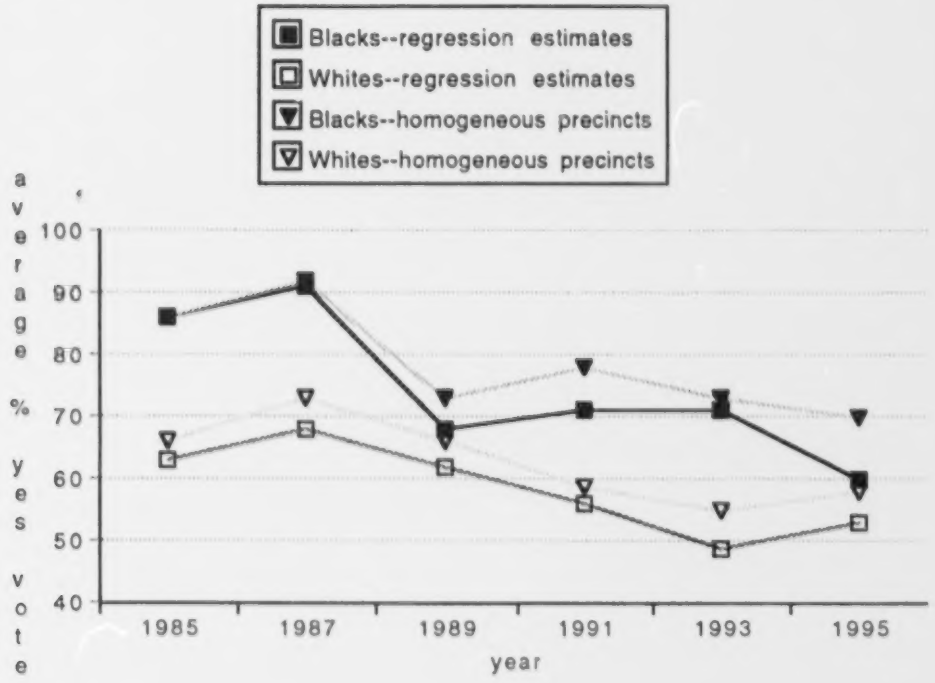
BLACK AND WHITE SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL BONDS 1985-95



Source: Data in Table I

Figure II

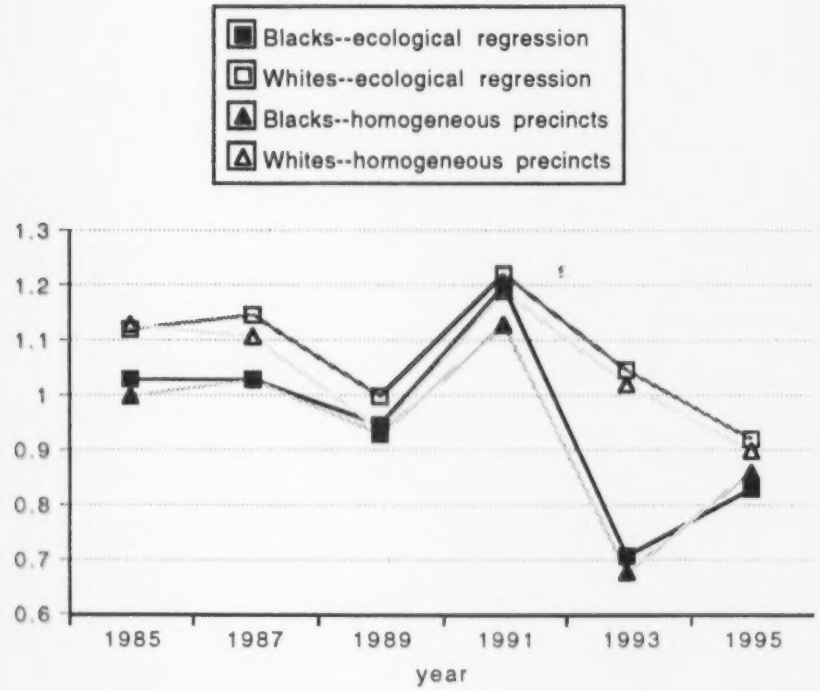
BLACK AND WHITE SUPPORT FOR ALL NON-SCHOOL BONDS 1985-95



Souce: Data in Table I

FIGURE III

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS BONDS COMPARED WITH ALL OTHER BONDS



Y axis = $\frac{\%\text{yes on school bonds}}{\text{average \% yes all other bonds}}$

Source: Data in Table I

TABLE I: **BLACK AND WHITE SUPPORT FOR COUNTY BONDS 1985--95**

		amount in millions	BLACKS (ecological regression)	WHITES (ecological regression)	BLACKS (homogeneous precincts)	WHITES (homogeneous precincts)
1985	Schools	$23	89	71	86	74
	Comm. College	2	91	68	89	71
	Water	3	84	67	84	70
	Solid Waste	69	86	76	88	79
	Parks	8	90	51	86	54
	Buildings	6	79	47	78	44
	Sewer	2	88	71	89	75
1987	Schools	31	94	78	95	81
	Solid Waste	10	89	75	91	80
	Parks	8	93	64	92	68
	Buildings	7	89	57	89	63
	Flood Control	5	90	68	92	73
	Comm. College	4	95	72	94	76
	Public TV	3	89	66	91	72
	Library	2	92	74	94	79
1989	School	80	65	62	68	62
	Buildings	1	57	52	64	57
	Parks	16	69	61	74	64
	Flood Control	17	68	62	74	67
	Library	2	70	65	74	68
	Comm. College	9	76	67	78	69
	Public TV	8	69	66	73	70
1991	Schools	86	87	69	88	70
	Parks	10	77	58	81	60
	Historic Preserv.	1	65	55	74	58
1993	Schools	192	50	51	50	56
	Parks	30	68	47	72	53
	Library	9	75	53	78	58
	Comm. College	5	78	57	78	63
	Buildings	3	64	38	67	46
	Public TV	2	68	48	72	55
1995	Schools	304	50	49	60	52
	Comm. College	35	63	51	69	56
	Library	10	58	55	70	59

Source: Computed from data publicly available at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Elections. Ecological regression estimates kindly provided by Ted Arrington, Steve Coppola, and the Urban Institute, all of the Univesity of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Note: Table entries are percentage yes vote.

TABLE II: **DECLINE IN SUPPORT FOR BONDS AFTER 1992**

		BLACK (Ecological Regression)	WHITE (Ecological Regression)	BLACK (Homogeneous Precincts)	WHITE (Homogeneous Precincts)
Average % yes on school bonds	1985-91:	84	70	84	72
	1993-95:	50	50	55	54
	% drop after 1992:	**40%**	**29%**	**35%**	**25%**
Average % yes all other bonds	1985-91:	79	62	82	66
	1993-95:	66	51	71	56
	% drop after 1992:	**17%**	**18%**	**13%**	**15%**
Average % yes on school bonds / *Average % yes all other bonds*	1985-91:	1.06	1.12	1.03	1.08
	1993-95:	.76	.98	.77	.96
	% drop after 1992:	**28%**	**12%**	**25%**	**11%**

Source: Computed from data in Table I.

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